

Snacks

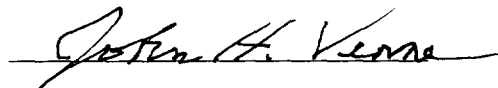
An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

Molly A. Mertz

Thesis Advisor

John Venne

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "John H. Venne", written over a horizontal line.

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Purpose of Thesis

This thesis is supposed to be the “capstone” of my college career at Ball State. I don’t see it as the “capstone” to my career at Ball State but as a building block in my writing career. *Snacks* is a collection of short stories that I have put together with care over the past few months. I like to question what the characters and stories mean to me and what they will mean to others. Humor is present in all of these stories in some manner which reflects my perspective on life. Despite their many flaws, the characters that are contained within the following pages have all become close to my heart. They are alike in that they are like eggshells and may crack under the slightest duress. I hope that you find *Snacks* as enjoyable as I have found it exciting to write.

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Yellowed Thoughts

“I can’t believe that after all of these years you’re finally letting me throw away some of this crap,” Ann says while crouching down on an old wooden stool in the attic of her childhood home.

“I thought I should have you go through all of your old high school papers in case you wanted to keep some of them,” Ann’s mom replies as she drops a box labeled *ANN’S OLD PAPERS* in front of her.

“I don’t see why you would think that I would want any of this stuff. That was over fifteen years ago.”

Ann opens the dusty box and fights a sneeze caused by the dust that tickles the inside of her nose. She pulls out a stack of wrinkled, yellow, musty, smelling papers and begins flipping through them. Most of the assignments she can’t remember doing, but a few of them she remembers. There are the four sketches that she did for her English class project on Dickens. She comes across a C+ labeled essay test that she took in ninth grade over *The Interlopers*.

“God, I was so embarrassed,” she says as she shows the test to her mother, who has found the mate to Ann’s stool and now sits beside her. “I remember because she put that little note at the back of it. I had gotten an A+ on the first essay that I did for her and then did something like this. God, I hated that story. I really don’t understand how I ever managed to get a C+ on it because I didn’t read anything past page three.”

“Stay or go?” her mother asks as she takes the paper from Ann’s hands. “I think maybe you should keep it.”

“Why would I want to do that?” Ann asks with her eyebrows dipping down toward the bridge of her nose.

“You could use it as a *learn from my mistakes example* with your kids.”

Shrugging her shoulders and stretching out her left hand, Ann replies, “What kids? I don’t have any kids.”

Rolling her eyes up at the ceiling, Ann’s mother answers, “No. But you will...eventually.”

Turning her attention back to the rest of the papers in her lap, Ann says, “Keep it I guess.” She tosses the remaining papers into a brown cardboard box with Gilbey’s Gin logos on the sides that she picked up from her neighborhood liquor store.

Reaching into the dusty old box, Ann pulls out another stack of papers. From the headings, she sees that these are from Mr. Cooper’s class that she had in eleventh grade.

“I never did understand how any teacher could be so cool outside of class and be such a total dick in class.”

“Watch your language,” instantly comes out of Ann’s mother’s mouth and along with it a glare that Ann picks up out of the corner of her eye.

“I can’t believe that you still have a problem with me using foul language even though you use it yourself.”

“I will not have my daughter using that type of language in my house.”

“Whatever.”

Ann flips through the papers and reads the titles and comments on each one before going to the next. She finds a much older paper that she wrote when she was still in elementary school entitled “My Future Plans.”

I will get married when I am twenty-one to a doctor or Steve Manson. When I'm 22, I will have a baby. At 25, we will move to the Sander's house next to the lake and buy a boat... We will have a total of four children- two girls and two boys... a big happy family forever.

Ann shakes her head from side to side. "Just exactly how frequently did I sniff glue as a child?"

Her mother looks at her with her frequent look of what *the hell are you talking about now*. "What?"

"Boy, I was clearly disillusioned as a child."

"What are you talking about?"

"Nothing. I just read a paper from elementary school on my future as I saw it and so far, I've not accomplished anything that I wanted to do then."

"Let me see that," her mother says as she reaches out and begins looking at it. "Well, your not going to live in the Sander's house because it burned down five years ago. Steve Manson is a priest so I sincerely doubt you'll marry him. Marrying a doctor is still a possibility, but a small one because everyone wants to marry a doctor. However, you still have plenty of time to get married and have children with someone."

Ann runs her hands through her thick, brown hair and stares up at the water-spotted ceiling with her deep blue eyes. She closes her eyes so tight that she can see the purplish-red veins that run through them from the light that filters in through the attic window. Along with the veins, she can see the image of herself as a twenty-two year old when her mother comforted her after her breakup with her boyfriend.

“Oh, I wish you wouldn’t cry. All men are such jerks. There not worth it, honey.” She can still hear her mother’s words echoing in her head.

Since then, she had tried to explain to her mother many times that; “If men are such pigs, then why do you want me to marry one?”

Her mother’s answer always pissed her off. “You want to have children someday, don’t you dear?”

Ann gathers up all of her strength to tell her mother the one thing that she has wanted to do. She takes a few deep breaths and prepares for what will surely be a heated debate.

Her mother responds to Ann’s heavy breathing. “Are your allergies bothering you? If they are we can go downstairs and do this in the living room?”

“No. I’m fine,” Ann says while shaking her head from side to side. She does this not only as a sign of no but as a way to relieve the tension that pops up in her neck. “I’m going to have a baby.”

While digging in another box across the room, Ann’s mother simply replies, “Honey, we talked about this when you were eight. You have to have sex to have a baby and you and I both know that you’re not having sex.”

Ann lets an “ARRGH,” escape from deep down in her throat and her mother looks over at her. “I am going to have a baby three years and nine months from today.”

“Of course you are.”

“I don’t think you understand. I decided over four years ago to set a date and time for Prince Charming or Mr. Okay to show up. I also decided that if they don’t, I’m going to the fertility clinic in Springton and be artificially inseminated.”

The dust went flying as Ann's mother fell upon the old sofa that had been moved up to the attic. Ann's mother looked at the floor and laughed softly.

"Mom?" Ann asks with a voice like the kind that she used to use when she was a child and had just done something wrong.

"Yes?" is her mother's soft-spoken reply.

"I just can't sit around and wait much longer. I know this sounds so clichéd and melodramatic, but my biological clock is ticking. And right now it sounds as if I have Big Ben in my head."

"What will I tell my friends and our family?"

"The truth. Its nothing to be ashamed of."

"What!" Ann's mom yells and without thinking, quickly expels all of the ramblings that are going on inside her head. "That my grandchild was produced by some guy getting off on porno magazines and then that some doctor stuck a turkey baster into my daughter and filled her up with the pervert's sperm."

Ann's mouth drops open, and her feet hit the floor. She starts to go down the attic stairs but then changes her mind. Turning from the stairs, she looks at her mother with tears streaming down her face while she thinks of what to say next because she never imagined her mother reacting this way.

With trembling lips, she manages to spit out her thoughts. "I thought you might be a little more understanding than this. I mean-how could you say something like that to me? You know that I've been trying really hard to find someone, and its just not happening. For my sake, let me know that if I do this that you will be there for me and the baby. If not, tell me now, and you'll never have to see it when it gets here."

Looking at her daughter, Ann's mother's face begins to soften as she begins to realize just how important it is for her daughter to have this hypothetical baby. She gets up off of the couch and walks over to her daughter and puts her arms around her.

"You know that what I just said I didn't mean, right?" Ann nods her head. "I was just reacting. You have no idea of how hard its going to be to raise a child on your own."

"This is not some decision that I decided to do on the spur of the moment. I have thought long and hard about having a baby and now I think that I can give it everything it needs."

"I just don't know."

"Look, you did great a great job raising me by yourself. What makes you think that I can't do that for this baby?"

Ann's mother grips her tighter and says, "I always told you that you could do anything that you set your mind to. Never in a million years did I think you would do this."

"So, you're okay with this?" Ann asks, backing up a little to get a look into her mother's eyes.

"Give me a little while to get used to it. I'm not as hip as you think that I am."

The two of them stand there a little while longer before relaxing their grip. Ann's mother walks over to the other end of the attic where the light from the window collects the brightest. She pulls an old white sheet off of a brown suitcase, sits on the floor, and opens it.

"What's that?" Ann asks while walking over to get a closer look at its contents.

“Your old baby clothes,” her mother responds while taking out a little pink and white bonnet.

“You’re not getting sentimental on me, are you?”

“I have a right to. I’m your mother.” After a short pause, she continues, “And one day, you’ll understand what I mean.”

Sitting down, Ann comments, “Did I ever tell you about the deal that I have with Robert Simmons about what we are going to do when we reach forty?”

“No. And I think that I have heard all that I want to hear about deadlines.”

“Robert and I have this pact that when we reach forty, and, if neither one of us are married, that we’ll get married.”

After rolling her eyes in her head, Ann’s mother gets up and walks down the attic stairs.

“Mom? Hey, where are you going? I’m not serious. It was just some stupid high school thing?” After hearing no response from her mother other than the sound of her tennis shoes hitting the wood flooring with every step, Ann rises from the floor and yells down the stairs, “Hey! I was just kidding. Mom it was a joke. Mom? Mom?”

A Fat-Free and Sexless Life

"I look like a mannequin in the window of Lane Bryant," she says as she looks at her full-figured reflection in the full-length door mirror.

"What?" her best friend, Angie, asked as she returns from the kitchen with a Diet Coke and Snackwell's fat-free chocolate cookie.

"I look like I belong in the display window of a fucking Lane Bryant store."

"Why do you say that?" she asks as she plops down on the queen-sized bed.

"Never mind. I'm just having my post-work rant."

"Aw. Did someone have a bad day?" Angie mumbles with a mouthful of cookie.

"Yes. Jeff grabbed my ass at work again and I slapped him."

"You did what!" Angie asks excitedly as a mouthful of the chocolate cookie tumbles its way down her chin and falls into the hand that is quickly there to catch it.

"Well! He deserved it. I just wasn't pissed off enough to slap him the first time. Now, I don't give a rat's ass. If they want to fucking fire me for slapping him, let them. I'll just sue their ass for providing a hostile working environment."

"Good for you. Was anyone else around this time to witness the event?" Angie asks while getting up and taking a Kleenex out of the box to wipe off her hands and face.

"Mr. Samuelson from the copy room saw the whole thing. I know that if I need him to vouch for me he will. No one in that office likes Jeff's sorry butt." Laura remarks while running her hand through her long, dark hair.

"That's got to help you out," Angie says in between gulps of Diet Coke.

"That it does."

Laura walks over to the dresser and pulls out a pair of gold hoop earrings from her mother's old jewelry box and puts them in her ears. Then, she takes her lipstick and applies it to her naturally pouty mouth.

Upon finishing her Diet Coke, Angie asks, "Hey, are you ready to go?"

"In about a year from now, I may be ready," Laura comments while looking disapprovingly at her image in the mirror.

Angie gets up off the bed and gives Laura a squeeze. "You look great. You have to go. You never have a bad time.

"Excuse me? I don't know where you get off saying that I've never had a bad time." Laura turns and faces Angie and places her hands on her hips. "Need I remind you of the man who was old enough to be my grandfather that dropped his pants in front of me in the parking lot and started jacking-off."

Turning away, Angie replies, "I was hoping you had forgotten about that. Anyway, it gave you a great story to tell everyone."

"Or the time that I got so drunk I wound up in bed with a guy that looked like he belonged in an '80s rock band."

"Boy, that was a huge mistake," Angie says while trying to stifle laughter. "That guy had the worst teeth. He should have been in the American version of *The Big Book of British Smiles*."

"Thank God, I can't recall kissing him. Those teeth-he had some type of gum disease that made them look like that. I know because he told me about it in the morning while we were both in the bathroom brushing our teeth."

Waving her hands back in forth, Angie says, “Enough about memory lane. It’s time to go party.”

Angie pushes Laura out of the bedroom and down the hall into the living room. She turns out the lights but leaves one on to light up their return home.

“Laura, do you have everything?”

“Everything for tonight –yes. Everything that I want for life- no. I really don’t want to go.”

“Shhh. You’re going. Besides you always have a great time,” Angie says as she grabs both of their purses, ready to head out for the evening.

“No. I just act like I’m having a good time for your benefit.”

“Let’s go.” Jokingly, Angie asks, “Did you remember to bring your favorite form of birth control?”

“My, aren’t we being hopeful,” Laura sarcastically replies.

“Somebody has to be. How long has it been anyway?” Angie asks her while she begins counting on her fingers.

Slapping her fingers away, Laura says, “Let’s just say this much- this bike is so rusty that I think that someone would have more pleasure taking it to the junkyard than ever attempting to ride it.”

“Nonsense. Even a rusty bike is so tempting to pass up if you need a bike,” Angie retorts.

“Let’s go. I’m tired of trying to get out of this.”

“I knew you’d begin to see things my way.”

The World's Strongest Man

“Damn! That black, mangy mutt left another pile of disgusting brown, stinky shit at the corner of my lawn again!” I say this to myself upon seeing the mess while peering through the blinds of my living room window to see if the college co-eds across the street have decided to sunbathe today. Seeing that the neighbors’ dog decided to use my yard as its bathroom facility was not what I had my heart set on. I decide I’m going to have to call those worthless neighbors of mine again. I pick up the phone next to the window and push the 10 program button, possessing the foresight to program it a couple of weeks ago when this all started.

“What’s the deal!” I immediately begin to yell into the ear of the unlucky person who picks up on the other end. They ask me who I am and what I’m talking about, but I only continue my tirade. “I call you every time your dog decides to do his business on my lawn. What are you going to do about it?” I wait for the man to say something but only hear the sound of a click as the receiver is hung up. “Asshole,” I say into the phone, knowing that it’s too late for him to hear.

It pains me every time I have to think about going outside and picking up after this freak of nature. It is not my place to pick up its shit, and it shouldn’t be. It’s their fucking dog; therefore, whatever comes out of its ass is their responsibility.

God, I cuss a lot lately. I guess that’s what happens when you reach middle age. The senility of life begins to drift into every little action that used to be no bother at all.

After having these personal revelations while staring at the mass occupying space on my lawn, I realize that I’m hungry. How I can possibly be hungry after reflecting on a pile of shit, I’ll never understand.

I close my eyes to concentrate on what I want to eat. Hmm. Sausage and onions pops into my head. I can visualize the pan with its sizzling mixture of Italian sausage links, strips of green peppers, and sliced sweet red onions cooking on the stove. The smoke rises off of the pan bringing with it this incredible aroma which finds its way into my nose. It'll just have to remain a vision though because I forgot to stop off at the store when I got off work yesterday.

The clock on the wall chimes that it's 1:00p.m. I realize I haven't even turned on the television to see what's on the sports channel. I walk over to the couch and dig down into the black, imitation leather cushions and find the remote buried in them along with a can of spray cheese. I continue digging and, as I expect, pull out half a package of crackers. I knew that the crackers would be there because I think that it's disgusting to spray the cheese directly into my mouth.

While adjusting my red and black flannel boxer shorts, I take care of an itch that has plagued me for most of my day. I turn the television on and plop onto the nice cushy couch. To my surprise, *The World's Strongest Man* is on.

I know that the television executives use it as filler when there are no major sporting events planned for that day, but I find it to be the most exhilarating show on television. The events are so outrageous that I can't imagine who the creative genius is behind them.

Frequently, I imagine myself as one of the contestants. There I am on the television trying to perform an admittedly meaningless task like trying to pick-up a hallowed out Volkswagen bug and carrying it twenty feet in the shortest amount of time.

Or trying to do another of my favorite events which involves throwing an empty keg as high as you can over a wall.

I just think about how cool it would be to have an award on my shelf saying *The World's Strongest Man* with my name under it. That's actually become a dream of mine. I want to win that contest. I want to be *The World's Strongest Man* and get the really cool title.

The sounds of a dog barking make the image of myself holding up the trophy and having swimsuit models hang off of me go away. I cautiously rise from the leather couch because I have begun to stick to it. Buying a leather couch is not something I should have done until I got an air conditioner.

Following the sounds of the barking dog, I am again at my living room window. I peek out, and there it is. The black mutt once again taking care of business on my lawn. It's looks over at me and smiles. I swear to god the damn thing is smiling at me. I can see its red tongue in-between its crooked teeth.

"Son of a bitch!" I yell, and the dog apparently hears me as it takes off into its yard. Evidently, it fears that I'm going to go outside and put it out of its misery.

I debate about whether or not I should call the owners once again and complain. I conclude that it won't do any good. I resolve that I am going to be the one that has to go outside and clean up after my nemesis. I bet that you would never see the World's Strongest Man going outside to clean up after his neighbors' dog.

Soap Opera Diva

As Selma gets up to go to the refrigerator to get herself a can of Diet Coke and the half-eaten quart container of Ben and Jerry's Cherry Garcia, the clear impression of her rather generous bottom could be seen in the orange, overstuffed couch cushions. Upon her return, her butt fit right back into place as if the couch had been molded to fit it. She reaches for the remote with its buttons that had been pressed so much that the stamping had come off and had been marred by her flaming red, long, sharp fingernails. A teal 2 followed by a dash appear in the upper-right hand corner of the fifty-one inch picture-in-picture television. Her husband had given it to her as an, "I'm sorry I'm such a dick," present before he left to begin a sales trip that would take him away from home and put him on the road for at least two months.

She could not wait for today's episode of *The Sun Always Rises*. Her anxiety level had increased tremendously over the last twenty-four hours. She had taken her blood pressure as soon as she had gotten out of the shower to discover that her pulse was twenty-four beats faster and that her blood pressure was fifty points higher than it was supposed to be according to her anal retentive, middle-aged, balding doctor. The thought of her doctor had incensed her. *Hell, he even told me that it wouldn't hurt me to lose a few pounds, but I got him, and I got him good. When I told him that he could stand to lose a little weight of his own because his wife had to be doubly miserable during sex because not only was he balding, he had to be crushing the tiny woman under the girth of his stomach, his bald spot turned the same blood red as his face. Yeah, I got him good.*

Her thoughts returned to today's episode. All of the subscribers to the *Soap Opera Times* knew Kyle was supposed to come out of his coma after being in it for a

— week and declare that he didn't love Julie and was only using her for sex. The thought of him actually being in love with Julie made her want to wretch. *God that Julie is such a bitch! All she wants is his damn money. And to think that his wife isn't smart enough to figure out that they're having an affair. I mean they haven't done **anything** but sleep in the same bed for four months. The new sportscar should have been her first tip that something was wrong. I mean who goes out and spends that kind of money on a present without having something to feel guilty about.*

— She digs deep into the Cherry Garcia. So deep, that the spoon bends under the force. *God this is way better than sex with David. Why do I need David when I can have Ben and Jerry anytime? This was the greatest way for them to pay tribute to Jerry Garcia, naming an ice cream for him. He was a sexy man. I would have loved to be the groupie at the end of the Grateful Dead's concerts that got to run her fingers through his gray funky hair and beard. I would have loved to roam my hands across his pot-belly. Of course that will never happen since he's dead now.*

— A series of commercials begins. The first showing some woman in a bikini jumping up into the air and screaming "Toyota!" does nothing for her along with the next two, advertising some new types of cleaner. The fourth one quickly grabs her attention. Its Fabio advertising I Can't Believe It's Not Butter...Spray. *I'll believe that it's not butter when you give me the chance to lick it off your massive, rippled chest. That would really get the women into the store. Promoting it with a contest. I can see it now. Fabio lying on a chaise lounge in a black Speedo with a blue line drawn down his rippled stomach and butter on his chest. One can of butter spray and one can of not butter spray sitting next to him on a white table. And underneath the words "Try to win a chance to*

lick this not butter and butter spray off my chest.” That would really get the women going. God knows that I’d be going to the post office and sending in twenty or thirty postcards into that contest.

“Yesterday on *The Sun Always Rises...*” a booming voice says from the television set. She grips the remote and pushes the volume button until the little teal bar appears on the screen and fills itself up to 22 notches on the scale. *This is it. God, I can’t wait to see this! Now she’s going to get it. Give it to her good Kyle!*

“Julie, I have something important to tell you.”

“What is it Kyle?”

“Julie, I...”

“Yes, Kyle.”

“I don’t...”

A BGK logo appears across the screen. *Son of a bitch! They’ve got some nerve to interrupt my program for some stupid announcement.* A man standing in front of a weather map of New York appears. “Sorry to interrupt your program folks. A blizzard warning has been issued for the residents of the northern third of New York. Viewers in and around this area are advised to prepare themselves for blizzard conditions. Remember last year’s blizzard folks? Well, this one’s going to be a lot worse. If you don’t have provisions for at least three to five days, I’d advise you to go to the store and pick them up immediately. Well, we now return you to your regularly scheduled program already in progress.” The weather map is replaced by a commercial for toilet paper. *What the hell is this! Why the hell would anyone open an office window of a skyscraper to throw two different kinds of toilet paper out of it? I don’t think that anyone*

cares that much about how much toilet paper is on a roll to risk life and limb by dangling out a window on the fifty-third floor. If they cared they would do it the smart way. They would tape the two rolls to the bumpers of their car, drive off after clearing their trip odometer, have their kids tell them when the toilet papers run out, and use the odometer to determine the longest one.

The commercials end and Julie is seen standing outside Kyle's hospital room door with a red face. *Son of a bitch! Those bastards made me miss it. I can't believe this shit! Something this important, and they interrupt my program to issue some blizzard warning, so all the stupid people who haven't got brains enough to stock up on supplies will rush out to the store and grab anything and everything off the shelves. Oh my God! This is the last container of Ben and Jerry's. All those people will be out running around and trying to get food in a couple of hours. If I don't get there soon, there won't be any left. I've just got to get out of here.*

Hell-bent on getting to the Ben and Jerry's section in the freezer, she goes over to the door and squirms into her purple insulated boots and matching jacket. She picks up the keys to the Bronco and closes the door after her. Over the sounds of the Bronco roaring to life, the sounds of the television can still be heard along with the words "Julie, I don't love you," being spoken by Kyle, the former coma victim.

The Welcome

Oops. Late for dinner. She's gonna kill me. I had better walk faster. I don't know why at sixty-seven years of age that I'm still afraid of her. I guess that it stems from all of the times that she used to put me in headlocks when I was a child. I never met anyone during my entire junior and high school wrestling career that could apply a headlock like her. But, then again, I had a career record of 30-157 with the thirty wins coming by forfeit. I can see her now, inviting me inside and placing me in a headlock that tightens whenever I give a response to her, "Why are you late, Morris? Why are you late?"

I've never been *really* afraid of her. By this, I mean to the point that I feared for my life. Not even when she picked me up by the ankles when I was five and dangled me over the edge of our roof, threatening to let go of me. She had explained to me that she would tell our parents, "you got mad at me and threw yourself off the roof in an attempt to get me in trouble. They'll believe me too because I'm the oldest and that means that they trust me more than you."

Perhaps, my fear of her began later. I remember when I was ten, I had the biggest crush on Sue Ann Stevenson. SAS was written all over Sue's notebooks. I had seen the same initials on the walls of the boy's bathrooms paired with initials belonging to guys in the grades above us. She was a beauty at age 11. She had two long blonde ponytails, the figure of a sixteen-year-old girl, and the ability to make any boy blush with the slightest look in his direction.

I know that Sue Ann was the first girl in our class to wear a bra because my best friend Jack used to go around and try to flip bra straps and had not found any for the first

few weeks of school. Then, one day he hit paydirt. It was the day after Sue Ann's birthday. Jack walked up behind her, flipped her bra, and ran for his life. Boy, you should have seen her face. She skipped slowly blushing and went from milky white straight to blood red. She immediately took off in pursuit with her clique following her. Jack saved himself with a bit of quick thinking. He sprinted straight for the teacher and confessed everything just before the mob was upon him. He knew that none of the girls would be able to touch him if he was under the protection of Mrs. Helms. He did this even though he knew that his bottom would be as red as Sue Ann's face was for the next few days.

Anyway, back to me. I was out at the lake with my family for the Fourth of July celebration that occurred every year. Just about everyone from town was there, including Sue Ann. She looked absolutely gorgeous dressed in her black and white striped bathing suit with her long, blonde hair pulled straight back. I was extremely grateful to the person that had designed her suit because it answered many of the questions that had been left to my imagination. I could never really get a good estimate of how large her breasts were due to the looseness of the dresses that she wore; this suit took care of that. Her breasts were larger than I thought, not much larger but enough to notice.

So, I was standing at the edge of the lake admiring Sue Ann and her beauty when all of a sudden, I felt a tug on my swimming trunks. It was quickly followed by the sensation of cool air blowing between my thighs. I had been pantsed, and I immediately knew who the responsible party was as soon as I heard the familiar laughter behind me. There was no mistaking the identity of the person who possessed the jackal-like laughter that erupted behind me. It was her, my loving sister.

I tried to pull up my trunks before I caught the attention of others, but to no avail. My sister alerted everyone to my state of attire, yelling, "Hey! Look at him!" That was followed by the sounds of booming laughter erupting from all around me, a shriek of shock from Sue Ann, and the voice of my mother yelling, "For God's sake, Morris, cover yourself!"

I pulled my black trunks up and dejectedly walked off into the woods where I stayed until after the fireworks were over, and I knew it was time to get in the car to go home. My mother and father both talked to me that night and on many others soon following that. Both of them had strong feelings concerning my future. They feared that when I got older, I would be a flasher or pervert. I tried to tell them many times that Claudia was the one who had pulled my trunks down, but they didn't believe me. I guess that if she had dropped me off the roof that day, they would have believed her after all.

I still find myself thinking of Sue Ann. I didn't see her again after that summer because her family moved away and her mother, like many of the other mothers, wouldn't let her anywhere near me. Her father got some kind of a job out of state, so it was necessary for them to move. I never told her of my love for her. I don't regret not telling her because I'm sure that she would have started screaming the moment that I got anywhere close to her. What I hate most is that she saw me at such a young age before I had started to grow, so when and if she ever thinks about me, she imagines me as that naked, scrawny, ten year old boy standing at the lake with his black trunks around his ankles, and his small penis blowing in the wind. What a way to be remembered!

I'm almost there. It's a good thing too. I can see her in the house with her wrinkled face pressed up against the window looking for me. She'll be wearing the same

— dress that she wears every time that we have dinner together. The black polyester high necked one that she bought to wear to the funeral of her late husband, Fred.

Fred was the lucky one. He was given the easy way out. I'm sure that he's up in heaven. He'd have to be a saint for putting up with her all those years. I often wonder if they ever consummated their marriage. They never had any children, and I never saw any displays of affection between them, only displays of disgust coming from my sister. He was a good guy.

— There's the house. Oh, and look, there's a fogged up circle on the window from where someone has been breathing on it. She's been looking for me. I don't know why I don't spare myself and turn around and go back the way that I came. We have never been friends, but only siblings that tolerate each other because we're family. My mother had begged us to get along the whole time that she was alive, but even our love for her couldn't cause us to set aside our repugnant feelings for one another.

I should probably ring the doorbell. It'll take her a good five minutes to get here with her walker. She's only seven years older than I am, but she looks fifteen years older. Her skin is wrinkled up and hangs off her face like one of those Shar-Pei dogs. It's ghostly white except for the prevalent liver spots. I should have brought a cigar with me. I don't know how I could possibly forget one. Nothing annoys her more than when I smoke a Cuban after dinner.

I hear the door opening. There she is in the black dress, humped over her walker with her white hair pulled back so tight it looks like she's trying to give herself a face lift.

— “You're late,” she tells me, as she begins her journey into the dining room that will take her at least two minutes to get to even though it's only a few feet away.

“I forgot that I had some errands to run.” I hang my navy blue winter coat and hat on the oak coat rack in the entranceway.

I slowly walk behind her and look around at the contents of her old, dusty house. There are all sorts of family heirlooms. Pictures of our parents and other long since deceased family members on the walls and tables. There are pictures of my children and my ex-wife. I had to divorce that woman. She was killing me, and there was no way that I was going to let her bully me into the grave like my sister did Fred.

I sniff the air and detect the aromas of fresh baked rolls and cabbage. Cabbage! Who says that all old people like cabbage? I for one can't stand the stuff, and she knows it. To me the smell is so overwhelming that I can't imagine why anyone would ever want to see what taste goes along with the smell.

Seeing that Claudia is almost to the dining room, I begin to head in that direction. When we enter the dining room, the mound of golden brown rolls placed next to a bowl of steamed cabbage reaffirms my sense of smell. I don't worry though because I spy two juicy T-bone steaks sitting in the middle of the table and behind them are two large baked potatoes and dinner salads. This is the real reason why I come here. No one can cook like Claudia. It is the one redeeming quality I can identify that she possesses. I know that it may seem cruel to use her for food, but to me it is payment for the mental anguish that she inflicted upon me in our youth.

We sit down at our usual positions at the table. She is at the head, and I'm seated on the side to her left and wait impatiently for her to begin passing around the food. She starts with helping herself to the cabbage that she places back on the table, clearly aware

that I will not want any. Next, she picks up the steaks and places one on each of our plates. The biggest one she takes for herself of course.

After she finishes serving all of the food, we begin to eat. The steak is like butter in my mouth. It's extremely tender and flavored with rosemary and turmeric, her own special recipe. I wipe my mouth to remove any drool that may have escaped from it caused by the wonderful reaction of my tastebuds.

"This is really good," I tell her while preparing to shove another piece in my mouth.

"You're welcome." She says this to me even though I did not thank her but merely paid her a compliment.

In a few moments, I am almost finished with my dinner. Looking over at her plate, I see that she still has well over half of her dinner to consume. A soft sigh escapes from my lips since I know that I will have to sit here and watch her consume the rest of her dinner before we can eat desert.

I watch her eat. She eats like a cow. She puts the food in her mouth and chews in a circular pattern. It takes about fifteen cycles of her jowls before the food is chewed up enough to swallow. She takes another bite of the steak and a drink of water. She begins to pound on her chest, and her face starts to turn red. It takes me a few moments to realize that she's choking on the miniscule bite of food that she just put in her mouth and not just upset with me for something that I might have done wrong.

"Are you okay?" I ask even though it is clear that she's not as her face has begun to turn blue.

She says nothing but only continues to beat on her chest with her clenched hand. I get up from behind her and for a few seconds wonder whether or not I should try to save her. Don't get me wrong. It's not as if I want her to die. She's lived a long life of her choosing, and I'm still angry about all of that childhood stuff. However, I brush this aside when I realize that if I don't help her she's probably going to haunt me for the rest of my life.

Carefully, I pick her up out of her seat and wrap my arms around her. She feels extremely strange being in them because she has not been in them in over twenty years since the time of our mother's death.

"On three," I tell her. "One, two, three." I squeeze her frail withered body, and the food does not come out. I decide to try again using more force. The steak comes flying out of her mouth and with amazing accuracy lands in my grandfather's old bronze spittoon that's against the far wall.

Immediately, she begins gasping for air. The white color slowly returns to her face from its previous shades of blue and red. She reaches for a napkin to remove the liquid that was forced from her mouth.

Turning to me, she says, "Thank you."

Shocked by this sudden uncharacteristic response by her, I manage to say to her the words that she had spoken to me earlier that evening. "You're welcome."